



Guide to Emotion Coaching

Aberdeenshire Council Educational Psychology Service July 2020

What is Emotion Coaching?

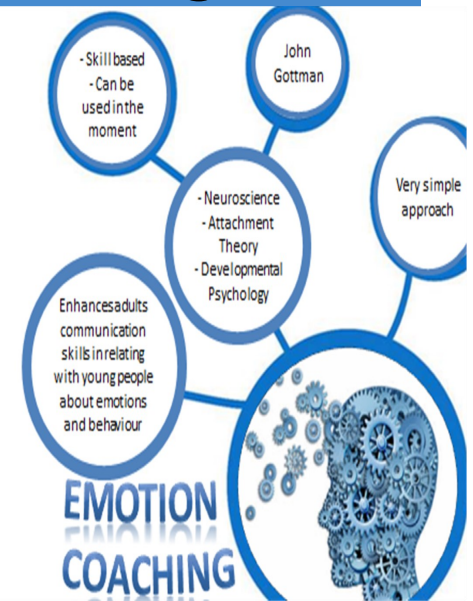
Emotion Coaching is a 4 step approach based on the work of John Gottman an American psychological researcher.

It is easy to learn and can be used by parents/carers and educators to support children through life's ups and downs, in a way that builds confidence and promotes emotional wellbeing. The approach helps children understand emotions and deal with them more effectively. Emotional regulation is an important life-long skill.

Emotion coaching recognises that socially competent children who are able to understand and manage their emotions are better equipped to go on to achieve higher academic success than those who lack impulse control or have poor social skills. Emotion coaching **helps children with emotional moments now and prepares them to handle challenges in later life.**

95% of emotion coaching it trying to understand and empathise with your child's experience — to put yourself in their shoes and see things from their point of view first. It will help you remain calmer too.

The approach can increase your emotional awareness and communication skills, improve your emotional responsiveness and, in turn, creates more emotionally intelligent children. It might feel uncomfortable to start with but it is worth the effort. **When children have their feelings paid attention to and acknowledged they feel safer, calmer and more secure.**



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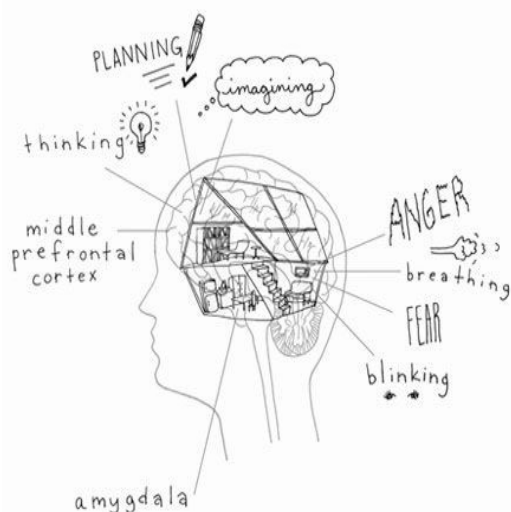
Helping children and young people to understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur and how to handle them."

(Gottman, 1996)



We learn to regulate and understand our emotions through our relationships with others.

We are all hard wired to experience more negative than positive emotions.



Psychologist Paul Ekman—identified 7 basic emotions which we are all hard wired to experience, these are mostly negative:

Fear, joy, sadness, anger, disgust, surprise, contempt

Emotion coaching uses 4 steps to help all of the different parts of our brain to keep talking to one another and to help us to remain calm when we are experiencing difficult emotions. By using the left brain to connect and empathise with the right brain emotions and name these we can keep our upstairs and downstairs brains working together. Keeping their upstairs and downstairs brain working together can mean children and adults can use their upstairs "thinking brain" to solve problems and remain calmer.

Gottman's research basis

Dr. John Gottman studied families for over 20 years to learn which kids were developing successfully and which were not. He measured how well the children performed in school, observed how well they related to their peers, and interviewed them to see how appropriately they behaved socially and how they related to their parents. His team kept finding the same results: children who were Emotion Coached were more successful as adults in terms of friendships, employment, and academic performance than children parented in other ways.

The brain science



Emotion coaching is based on brain science. Sometimes we experience emotions in a very big way making it harder to process how we are feeling. Dan Siegel suggests that the brain is like a house with an upstairs and downstairs.

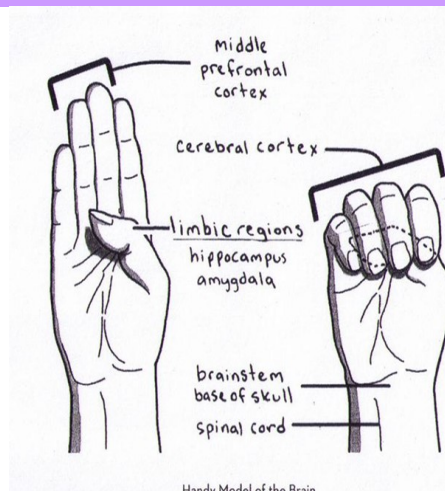
The **downstairs** brain includes the *brain stem* and *limbic region* – these areas are responsible for basic functions (breathing and blinking) and impulsive reactions to strong emotions like anger and fear (fight, flight or freeze).

The **upstairs** brain is more complex; where we learn, process language and develop problem solving and decision making skills. It is made up of the *cerebral cortex* and the *prefrontal cortex* behind your forehead. The upstairs brain continues to develop and is not fully formed until we reach our mid 20's. It controls most of your higher order thinking. When our upstairs brain is working we can regulate (be in control of) our emotions, consider consequences, think before acting and consider how others feel.

'Flipping our lids' when the downstairs brain takes over. [Click here to watch the clip.](#)

When children/adults feel under threat we go into survival mode, only the lower brain (downstairs) is working and controlling our behaviour. Sometimes when children experience big feelings, a temper tantrum, or get stuck in a negative emotion they stay in the downstairs brain, act on impulses and without thinking through consequences. Their upstairs and downstairs brains are not talking, they are not thinking rationally so **they do not mean what they are saying or doing, just like us adults when we have lost control.**

The hand model of the brain—flipping your lid



What are the 4 Steps of Emotion Coaching?

Step 1

Be aware of emotions: Recognise feelings and empathise with these

Look at your child think about how you would feel if you were experiencing a similar situation.

Give them your full attention.

Remain silent.

Observe, watch changes in face and listen.

Learn how they express different feelings.

What could they be feeling and why?

Don't dismiss the emotion, distract, disapprove of it or avoid it.

Your child will feel more secure when allowed to express the whole range of their feelings, positive and negative.

Children need to feel understood before they will accept correction.

Say: "I can see this has really upset you."

Show you are interested by using touch, empathetic facial expression and a nurturing tone of voice.

Take time to stop, breath and be curious.

Step 2

Validate feelings and label them

Children can often struggle to recognise the emotion they are feeling.

Use words to reflect back the child's emotion and help the child to label the emotion.

Simply observe –saying what you see rather than asking probing questions to which young people might not know answer.

Be specific and use a wide range of emotional words – frustrated, annoyed, jealous, excited.

Naming the emotion helps to soothe and regulate your child's brain so they can recover more quickly from upsets.

Notice what their behaviour tells you about how they feel.

Don't tell them how they should feel, dismiss their emotion, minimise it or try to distract them away from it.

Don't say "This really isn't worth getting angry about" Do say "You seem angry."

Help them to understand that their emotion is real and valid and that you recognise that.

Step 3

Set Limits

Even though the emotion is normal and natural, certain behaviours are not acceptable

There may be times when this step is not always needed as the child may just need support to make sense of their emotions. At other times, it is a very necessary step.

While you have validated the emotions in steps 1 and 2, in step 3, you are clear that you are not validating the behaviour -

Say: "It is okay to feel angry, it is not okay to shout."

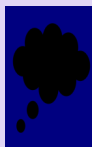
Step 4

Problem solve when calm

Only move onto this when all feelings have been acknowledged and everyone is calm.

Work together using a non-judgemental approach and find out what goal your child was trying to achieve with their behaviour

Help your child to think about or make a list of possible solutions/plans for coping with feelings or the same situation again that could lead to a more productive outcome. Talk through the different solutions that they come up with.



Take time on step 1 to make sure you fully connect with your child's experience and understand them

Why is emotion coaching helpful?

Children who learn about feelings and emotions have the following advantages:

- they feel calmer and learn self regulation
- they experience less illness
- they have stronger relationships with others

Encourage children to use 'I' to express their needs:

- I need a hug
- I need you to listen
- I need another chance
- I need to walk, stop, breathe
- I need help
- I need you to see I can do well

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We value your feedback, please complete our short survey by scanning the QR code.



Top emotion coaching tips.....

- * Say what you see and hear rather than ask lots of questions.
- * Children often don't know what they are feeling or why – Avoid asking why questions.
- * Do not ask questions you already know the answer to- e.g. "Who took out all the books?", instead use statements which are non-confrontational like "The books are all over the floor, I'm disappointed."
- * 'Connect' first before you correct by listening empathetically so your child feels understood.
- * Avoid *but...* 'I can see you feel sad but.....' as this will undermine your child's experience.
- * Find ways to help your children feel what needs feeling so feelings do not get stuck.
- * Help children to expect and accept negative emotions as part of everyday life.
- * Be aware of your own emotions, whether your lid is on and you are thinking rationally, or not. If you are triggered you can escalate the upset rather than calm it.
- * Separating the emotion from the behaviour is helpful, e.g. "It is okay to be angry everyone gets angry but it is not okay to hit or harm with your words or actions."

REMEMBER: Difficult behaviour signal big feelings or unmet needs. If you do not deal with the feelings and needs they will just burst out later in more difficult behaviour.

Further information & resources

For further information click on hyperlinks below:



[Dr Daniel Siegel presenting his Hand Model of the Brain](#)

[Dr Hazel Harrison explains what is happening in brain when we experience strong emotions \(7-12 year olds\)](#)

[Emotion coaching UK video for professionals](#)

[Pupils explain hand model of brain for children and adults to watch](#)

[Pixar: Inside Out clip 'Sadness' uses emotion coaching](#)



[Emotion coaching UK](#)

[Parenting Counts—five steps of emotion coaching](#)

[The Gottman Institute: a research-based approach to relationships](#)

[Zones of Regulation free downloadable materials](#)

[Emotion Works Scottish educational programme for emotional literacy and wellbeing](#)

Click here for [Emotion coaching handout for parents/ carers](#)



[Calm Parents, Happy Kids by Dr Laura Markham](#)

[The Whole-Brain Child by Dr Daniel Siegel & Dr Tina Payne Bryson](#)



Why it is ok for this to be tricky.....

We now know a lot more about how the brain responds when we experience 'big feelings' than we did when we were children ourselves.

Often as children ourselves we were not coached to manage big feelings but rather to stop them, distract ourselves from them, dismiss them or manage them on our own.

When our children get upset, frustrated or angry we can experience emotional anxiety.

We can take our children's experience of big emotions and what they say/ do personally, as if it is our fault they are feeling this way and something for us to fix. However, we cannot be in control of our children's emotional experiences. The feelings expressed during a meltdown are not about you, even when they are shouting 'I hate you'. Emotion coaching allows us to accept their feelings and help them find better ways to express them. To say: **"I hear how angry you are, and how much hate you feel. I love you no matter how angry you are. I will always love you no matter what."**

Children are driven by their emotional brains until around 10 years old. The brain develops from the bottom upwards so it is normal for them to have downstairs brain based responses and to experience more negative than positive emotions.